

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 25

Article 2

1-1-2006

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Jennifer Sattaur

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Recommended Citation

Sattaur, Jennifer (2006) "George MacDonald's Lilith: Whores in Babyland," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 25 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol25/iss1/2>

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George MacDonald's *Lilith*: Whores in Babyland

Jennifer Sattaur

George MacDonald, over a long literary career and an even longer lifetime, saw a great deal of the later Victorian era. As a Christian of unorthodox beliefs, exiled from his pulpit and forced to preach through his fiction writing instead,¹ his work offers a uniquely Christian perspective on both the middle and end of the nineteenth century. *Lilith*, published in 1895, purportedly came to him as a vision from God. The novel is one of two major fantasies he wrote for an adult audience—he is best known for his children's fairy tales, such as *At The Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*, and the majority of his writing consists of realistic novels. When *Lilith* first appeared, it was largely condemned as being obscure, difficult, and disturbing.² It is only more recently that the novel has been recognised as a work of value; C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton, in particular, were vehement in their praises and attributed much influence for their own work to MacDonald.³ The work has also attracted an unusual amount of interest from those seeking to apply Jungian psychoanalytical theory to literature, as the novel's dreamlike-quality and visionary depths are particularly in tune with the spiritual leaning of Jungianism. *Lilith* is often referred to as the closing chapter of his literary career, and it has the influence of half of the nineteenth century behind it.⁴ *Lilith* is much concerned with religion, and is interesting not only for the insights it reveals on MacDonald's life, but also for the way it reacts to the *fin de siècle* society as MacDonald perceived it. In the religious themes that MacDonald explores, patterns of the Child Archetype particularly appear in full force, and the attitudes toward childhood and procreation that they reveal are especially interesting: as a prolific writer, and a writer moreover of children's stories, at the time when the children's literature industry was just beginning to bloom, it is worthwhile examining MacDonald's attitude towards childhood in a work which was highly personal and not at all aimed at a child audience. This article seeks to explore this attitude by examining manifestations of the Child Archetype within the text.

As many Jungian analysts of the text have been eager to point out, the Christ-figure is an enduring manifestation of the Child Archetype. Just as the wilful failure to give in to God's will and suffering results in the sterility and

destruction that is so prevalent in *Lilith*, so does the innocent avoidance of suffering need to be remedied by an initiation into suffering that calls to mind the Christ-figure. There is, surprisingly, no Christ-figure in this text at all. This is, perhaps a reflection on the problems MacDonald had with the idea of Christ dying to redeem human-kind. As can be assumed from his sermons in particular, MacDonald does not seem to feel that vicarious suffering is effective. Rather, Christ's role is fulfilled by the duo of Adam and Eve, the ultimate parents of humanity and the cause of suffering on earth. Thus redemption is intimately linked to childhood, procreation, and maturation; the vulnerable potential of the Child manifests itself in a particular picture of childhood.

As can be expected from a text so concerned with procreation and with growing up, *Lilith* contains many portrayals of childhood; these are not, however, the saccharine characters found in much of Victorian literature, but rather they are complex and multi-layered archetypal figures. This can be seen most clearly in the depiction of the tribe of fugitive children headed by Lilith's daughter, Lona. These children are the offspring of the women of Bulika, who are abandoned in the woods by their terrified mothers at birth- to save them from murder by Lilith's leopardess- or rescued from the city by Mara's leopardess and taken to the woods, where Lona's tribe find and care for them. Although these children are able to grow slightly, they never grow very much, never reach maturity or, if they do grow, they become ignorant and malignant blunderers like the giants, their enemies. As Vane describes them upon first leaving them:

But the growth of the Little Ones was arrested! something interfered with it: what was it? Lona seemed the eldest of them, yet not more than fifteen, and had been long in charge of a multitude, in semblance and mostly in behaviour merest children, who regarded her as their mother! Were they growing at all? I doubted it. Of time they had scarcely the idea, of their own age they knew nothing! Lona herself thought she had lived always! Full of wisdom and empty of knowledge, she was at once their Love and their Law! (67-8)

These children, in an ironic twist to the idea of the fountain of youth, have no access to water, they cannot cry, and their nourishing fruit-trees survive only because of the underground rivers of whose existence they are unaware. Wolff says that "the Little Ones exemplify MacDonald's familiar doctrine about the peculiar sanctity of childhood..." (343); however, this view perhaps

glosses over the function the Little Ones serve in the unfolding of the narrative. These children, abandoned by their mothers at birth and living a life of primitive innocence under Lona's care, are anything but sacred. Rather, their innocence is a direct product of Lilith's sin, and their inability to grow, mature, and suffer is seen not as a blissful condition, but one from which they need rescuing. As Filmer-Davies says: "The few children who are born there are immediately exiled, for Bulika is a city of the Undead, not the living, of stagnation, not the spiritual development and growth for which the children have potential" (93). In this sense, they are like Adam and Eve in Eden, and Lilith as the tempting serpent is their unlikely saviour as well as their tormentor.

Gaarden's speculation is that the water the children lack is symbolic of motherly love: "The children need to grow, and they badly want mothers; in fact, hope of finding their mothers largely motivates their interest in invading Bulika. Static, sexless innocence may be preferable to evil, but is not MacDonald's idea of a terminal Paradise" (28). Wolff elaborates on this idea, saying: "Lilith's tears, the rain water, the water that Mara gives the children to drink- their first- is the symbol of maternal love. . ." (362) and that: "Vane surmises that it may be knowledge that the children need. We know MacDonald better than that. It is not knowledge the Little Ones need, but Mother-love. All the water—the essential maternal symbol—even the tears in their land, has dried up: the maternal affections are atrophied" (343). This view, however, does not explain why the focus of the plot is not to find mothers for the children, but rather to redeem Lilith and mature Vane. As Holbrook goes on to point out: "Of course, the dead mother can never be found, and the adult is too far advanced into maturity ever to be able to regress to early infancy, to complete the processes of psychic growth which belong to that first inter-subjectivity" (30). Wolff's view is a primarily biographical one, linking the plight of the Little One's to MacDonald's own early loss of his mother, and to psychoanalytical views of early childhood. However, as I have pointed out, the drive of the narrative is not merely to provide the children with motherly love. Indeed, the children get on well enough without mothers, and their attempts to find their mothers lead not to a regression into a happy childhood but rather to a maturation out of it. As Mendelson explains:

The fungoid giants, like the spectral dancers and the 'grotesque' couple... have reversed the natural order of growth but may

again reassert their evolutionary capabilities. The Little Ones, on the other hand, have been locked into a position of stasis, unable to encounter the risks and suffering inherent in growth and adulthood. (204)

It really is water that the Little Ones need in order to grow; just as plants need the rain (however gloomy it may be), the children need their tears. Both tears and rain have been stolen by Lilith, not to be released until her own suffering has commenced and Vane has acquired and buried the water trapped in her clenched fist:

I flung the sexton-tool on the verge, and laid down the hand.
A little water was already oozing from under its fingers. I
sprang out, and made haste to fill the grave. Then, utterly
fatigued, I dropped beside it, and fell asleep. (224)

And what is perhaps the most satisfying detail to find in the writing of an aged Victorian gentleman, Vane cannot even begin to set about this process until he has first erred and found the evil Lilith desirable.

Lilith's evil, then, is as necessary to the ultimate goal as her redemption is. When McGillis says that "Vane's quest is for the heavenly city and. . . he can only accomplish this with the assistance of a woman" (50), it is probably Mara, Eve, and perhaps Lona he has in mind. However, as important as these characters are in Vane's maturation, their work cannot begin until he has been tempted out of his seclusion, given the opportunity to do wrong, and experience the ultimate sin: sensual desire for an evil woman. McCann postulates that "obsessive romantic love blinds Vane to obvious truths; other kinds of love help him to understand them" (112). It is more accurate, however, to say that all forms of love that Vane encounters are both obsessive and instructive, and incomplete. Vane's unconsummated obsession with Lona is as disastrous as his sexual passion for her mother; both are necessary steps in his development. Wolff says: "*Lilith*. . . is an old man's book, and Vane. . . feels little or no desire for the women he meets" (346). To say this, however, ignores the testimony of Vane himself as well as the blatantly sexual imagery that surrounds Vane's encounters with his predatory antagonist. Both the sequence in which Vane finds and revives the corpse-like body of Lilith, and that in which Lilith feeds on his blood as he sleeps, are strongly erotic in tone. The first has a surprising tenderness to it:

To do for her all I could, I spread a thick layer of pine-needles and dry leaves, laid one of my garments over it, warm from my body, lifted her upon it, and covered her

with my clothes and a great heap of leaves... I crept into the heap of leaves, got as close to her as I could, and took her in my arms. I had not much heat left in me, but what I had I would share with her! Thus I spent what remained of the night, sleepless, and longing for the sun. Her cold seemed to radiate into me, but no heat to pass from me to her. (52)

The second scene, by contrast, has a frightening predatory feel to it, as Lilith reveals herself feeding on Vane's helpless desire:

The pain was dying away, but my whole body seemed paralysed. Some evil thing was upon me!- something hateful! I would have struggled, but could not reach a struggle. My will agonised, but in vain, to assert itself. I desisted, and lay passive. Then I became aware of a soft hand on my face, pressing my head into the pillow, and of a heavy weight lying across me. . . The princess was standing above me on the bed, looking out into the room, with the air of one who dreamed. Her great eyes were clear and calm. Her mouth wore a look of satisfied passion; she wiped from it a streak of red. (132-33)

The scene reads like a rape; the difficulty is that, knowing Lilith's evil, Vane has deliberately sought her out. Telling himself he wishes to test his mettle against her, nevertheless he ends up lying passive underneath her, victim to his desire as well as her hunger. As Filmer-Davies says:

There are about Lilith's attacks an erotic and indeed an orgasmic quality which provides Vane with real erotic pleasure. The symbolism is certainly meant to evoke the notion that evil is seductive on both a sexual and a social level, and that female sexuality is both a personal and public source of manipulative power and domination. (97)

As negative as Lilith seems, however, MacDonald shows her to be a necessary part of Vane's education. As McGillis writes:

Lilith herself, so the patriarch Adam states, is redeemed through childbirth. . . This is, however, a male fantasy: the female as mother must be safe and unthreatening. But Lilith the sexual being- never mind motherhood- is necessary to Vane's passage into maturity; indeed, she is in part created by his own desire. (52)

In order for the process of maturation to begin, Vane must be seduced by Lilith and learn to recognise sexual desire, and its contrast to love—

particularly the difference which separates love of power from divine love.

Lilith herself will be redeemed by her sexuality, following the circular logic of the plot. It is her pride, and not her womanhood, which led to Lilith's fall, and her offspring—the direct product of her womanhood and sexuality—will be the instrument of her salvation. It is worth, therefore, examining her character in terms of Victorian *fin de siècle* portrayals of womanhood. Edmund Cusick says: “Lilith is all that is occult, hidden, and fearful in woman. Cast out from the garden, Lilith is the shadow of Eve” (71), while Kath Filmer-Davies writes of *Lilith*'s “clear identification of the flawed female figure with aspects of Victorian society and culture as George MacDonald perceived them” (91). Seeking to avoid the allegory that MacDonald denied, it is nevertheless fair to say that Lilith is a classic example of the Femme Fatale type, associated with both corrupted power and sexuality, and bad motherhood. As McGillis says:

She [Lilith] blocks our view of the unfallen world and initiates us into generation, the experience of sexuality. From the book's point of view, from the male point of view, she is responsible for man's fall from grace. Leaving Adam, Lilith inaugurated the cycle of pain and suffering associated with childbirth, work, tyranny, and death. (51-2)

She is particularly linked to the process of procreation, as Mendelson describes:

As the force opposing that [Vane's] growth, MacDonald's Lilith. . . is at once an individual demon called into being by this hero and a universal force whose origins transcend this particular incarnation. In Jewish demonology, Lilith is an arch-destroyer whose precise function is to threaten women in labour and murder their off-spring. (206)

In *Lilith*, however, this femme fatale character is, startlingly, not only a part of the cure, but also a sympathetic character who does not need to relinquish her powerful personality in order to be redeemed. As McCann says: “*Lilith* verges on universalism, as it suggests that Lilith too could be saved, despite her many crimes and her bitter resentment” (113). It is almost as though her lust for power and her destructive sexuality are in part a creation of Adam's; throughout the novel Adam is the most aggressive against her, and he is also markedly inept at assisting his people. Adam's harshness is tempered into mercy by Mara, who has waited thousands of years for the chance to help her step-mother back into the fold. She has had to wait, because Adam does not

have the power to bring his errant ex-wife to heel; that is a task for another woman—Lona.

Thus the innocence of Eden is not enough; sin and knowledge are necessary before the grace of God can truly be earned. For this, a woman—indeed many differently feminine women—are needed. Noel O'Donaghue says:

In Lilith MacDonald recovers in his own way and in the images and traditions available to him the original world of Eden, the Paradise of innocent and holy love, the Land of the Young. . . Yet, for all this vision of innocence and freshness, evil has come: Lilith is evil, and so are the people of the city over which she rules. . . And so, the novel becomes a story of redemption in which Adam and Christ are one. The story insistently demands a feminine saviour as well, but MacDonald's strong residual Calvinism does not easily accommodate a Virgin Mother as the New Eve; however, this Eve-Mary figure is not far away at the end. (43)

On the contrary, the feminine saviour as virgin mother is very much present in the figure of Lona, who does indeed stand to be the New Eve. Gaarden says:

At least to modern taste, Lona *is* insipid, but there is good reason for this. Lona, too, is a Little One, though the tallest of the lot. She has never cried, never developed any depth, or complexity of character. She is the “heart's wife” of Vane, who according to Adam is “but beginning to become an individual”. She is simply, blandly, good. (26-27)

Nevertheless, this bland goodness is the quality which will prepare her to act as saviour. Eve herself has failed to help Vane—she has perhaps moved too far on the path of development to properly serve the role of feminine saviour to a flawed humanity. Lona, however, is primed and ready: she is the daughter of Lilith, and thus the antithesis to the destroying mother, she nurtures the humanity that Lilith would destroy. More importantly, she is still a child, and her nature as saviour lies in her inherent vulnerability. She is at the mercy of both Lilith's evil and Vane's error, and it only through her fall (the folly of leading the invasion of Bulika) and her death (at the hands of her mother) that redemption comes about. McGillis says: “*Lilith*, which begins ostensibly as a search for the father, ends with a vision of maternal comfort. . . The mother. . . liberates us from paternal meaning” (37). Furthermore, is it Lilith whom she will ultimately save, just as it is Christ's

role to save the people who slew him. "Lilith is both 'slain' and saved by her child. Lona, who symbolises the sacrificial nature of redemptive love, is slain in expressing her love to Lilith, only to awake later in Eve's house to fullness of life" (Hein 403). Lona combines the figure of Eve and Christ in one feminine body.

As we can see, then, the image of childhood revealed in the patterns of Child archetype which appear in *Lilith* are remarkably enlightened: both sinister and uplifting at the same time. MacDonald has linked childhood and death to growing up, sexuality, and procreation in a breathtakingly positive manner. C.S. Lewis was moved to write, in his introduction to the novel: "The whole book has a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also, quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, *good* Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise (that was where the Death came in) my imagination" (xi). By contrast, Wolff's analysis of the novel was less positive: "Without love, he [MacDonald] was saying to the human race, you condemn your children to stunted development or to destruction. To demonstrate this he shrinks from no cruelty in his narrative: in fact, he seems actually to enjoy the terrible" (358). The truth, I think, is that *Lilith* does not attempt to convert the reader, nor does it advocate a message of love. McGillis comes closer to seeing the point:

Lilith is between two worlds, one patriarchal and resistant to change, the other subversive and mercurial; one text-based and authoritarian, the other previous-to-text and dynamic. *Lilith* is distinctly *fin de siècle*; it signals the end of the world and heralds the coming of another yet powerless to be born. (46)

Rather than an argument for love or conversion, *Lilith* is a continuously revolving cycle in which the only message is: live and learn. *Lilith* is neither typical of the late-nineteenth century, nor typical of George MacDonald. It is, however, a valuable tool for measuring to what extent the common perception of childhood is a particularly Victorian product. Working within the framework of the late nineteenth century, MacDonald presents us with an image of childhood which manages neither to demonise nor idealise the child, but instead celebrates him/her/it as a necessary, transitory and ambiguous stage of life.

Endnotes

1. See William Reaper, *George MacDonald*, pp. 71-95.

2. See William Reaper, *George MacDonald*, pp. 364-84.
3. See C.S. Lewis "Introduction," and Stephen Prickett, "George MacDonald and the European Literary Tradition."
4. See William Reaper, *George MacDonald*, pp. 364-84.

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